

Naval War College Review

Volume 37
Number 4 *July-August*

Article 11

1984

In My View

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Recommended Citation

Eccles, H. E. (1984) "In My View," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 37 : No. 4 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol37/iss4/11>

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IN MY VIEW . . .



Ian Oliver

Sir,

As I follow current events in Central America, I am convinced that some fundamental, military principles are being ignored by American leaders. Strategic realism requires:

- The Challenge of Assumptions
- The Analysis of Objectives
- The Appraisal of Expectations.

It is difficult in the United States to achieve conceptual unity within the government, the Congress, and other public leaders as to the nature of the political-military problems we face and the best means of dealing with them.

This difficulty is inherent in the diversity of the cultural and ethnic mixture of our population. This mixture produces a diversity of values within the nation which is exacerbated by the scope and nature of the country's alliances. When this diversity causes confusion in the sense of values brought to bear on problems, it causes confusion in the policies and the strategy that eventually develop.

Another consequence of this diversity and of the special structure of the government, is that the so-called debates tend to focus on operational details rather than on the fundamental policy itself. This is a reversal of sound procedure.

The compulsion—common in Washington—to make an instant public response to events, and particularly to any public communication or signal from an adversary, can frequently do us great harm. The situation is complicated when, at the same time, secret conversations, centered on substance rather than propaganda, may be going on. Having in the meantime made hasty, silly statements in public, it is then easy to become committed to a foolish position from which it is difficult to depart.

When a major policy is so established, we should expect no coherent operational strategy. Instead, we should expect a succession of haphazard improvisations, followed by a steady deterioration of the political-military situation. Unless checked, this in turn may necessitate a military action which would not have been required had a sound decision been made at the beginning.

The military is then caught in the jaws of a vise. They are duty-bound to support the government policy even though it had been made against their better judgment. They are bound to do their utmost to conduct the ensuing combat operations to the

best of their ability and resources. In this they are also bound to present an image of confidence because one cannot expect troops to sacrifice their lives when they see their immediate leaders do not believe in the cause for which they are fighting.

There is a further implication of this situation. The greater the political commitments of the United States and the more nations in our alliances, the greater the complexity of the US political-military decisions. By corollary, the larger our alliances grow, the less will be our ability to sustain them. This is the inexorable law of diminishing returns in action. It emphasizes the fundamental strategic principle established by Herbert Rosinski that "Strategy must be selective in order to achieve economy of force. Comprehensive control of a field of action means a concentration on those *minimum key* lines of action or positions from which the entire field can be positively controlled."

One of the chief tasks in deciding US policy is to clarify the critical question of the political philosophy of our opponents. In terms of the classic military decision process, this appraisal becomes a "critical assumption." By this I mean it is a condition of uncertainty in which if one matter is assumed to be true a particular course of action becomes suitable and feasible. But if the matter is not true, that course of action becomes either unsuitable or infeasible, or both. In such case, an entirely different course of action is necessary in order to achieve the effect desired.

In most cases where it is not possible to ascertain the truth of the critical assumption before it becomes necessary to take action, the President must have an alternative plan ready to put into effect if and when the truth or untruth of the assumption is made clear by the course of events. This, of course, demands that the President have freedom of action.

It is highly unlikely that our political system and culture will place in high office people who understand and are comfortable enough with this concept to make such a decision process their normal practice. And that is why our expectations for the success of any emerging policy should be modest.

If the political philosophy of our opponent is Marxist-Leninist, we are facing a problem of the most dangerous kind. If, on the other hand, their philosophy is of the conventional Western European Socialist politicians, such as we see in France, Sweden, and West Germany, we have an entirely different and not particularly dangerous situation.

As one reads the current statements of officials and commentators, it is clear that while some of them recognize the difference between Western Socialism and Marxist-Leninist philosophy, few have spoken in clear enough terms to help public understanding of this critical issue. Even fewer have explored the implications and faced up to the costs in time, money and *political concentration* necessary to *defeat*, NOT *DETER*, a Leninist move.

The major point in this question of critical assumptions lies in the fact that the dedicated Leninist does not want negotiations to succeed in terms other than *surrender* by the adversary. The Leninist does not seek to bring peace and security to any area in which he does not have decisive control. He seeks rather to stimulate violence and insecurity which he can exploit to gain or consolidate control.

Of course, in some circumstances, the Leninist will accept a temporary accommodation and the appearance of successful negotiation in order to gain control

when circumstances change to his advantage. This type of maneuvering is well grounded in Lenin's doctrine of two steps forward and one step backward and in the application of that by Mao in China in 1945 to 1949. Furthermore, it is in harmony with the theory that strategy is the art of control.

There is still another point to be considered: Russian handbooks on chess since 1910 have advised players not to follow a "strongest position" strategy, but rather to force the opponent to make some definite commitment on the board even at the cost of some loss in position to themselves. Once a player has induced his adversary to commit his pieces to a particular position, *and to commit his mind* to a particular strategy, then he is advised to make a radical shift to confront the opponent with a new set of problems for which his mind is not prepared. In such cases, the *main attack* is not so much against the material resources but rather *against the decision-making process of the player*. Thus, it is perfectly in accord with both experience and theory to expect the Soviet Union or any Marxist-Leninist government to adopt an equivocal strategy.

Such a strategy can be pursued successfully only when the Executive has the freedom of action to make a radical shift in both policy and operational strategy without losing control of the sources of his power. The structure and decision processes of the United States are ill adapted to pursue such a policy and, what is more important in the current problems, they are ill-suited *to defend* against such equivocal action. This does not mean that we are helpless in the face of equivocal threats. It does mean that we must think more deeply and more rigorously about the problem. Among other things, we must recognize the harm that comes from semantic sloppiness and the neglect of fundamental military principles.

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